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## Social media as an informal learning platform: Case study on adult learning at SIM University, Singapore

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### Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of using digital and social media as part of the learning platform, with reference to public relations offered by the School of Arts and Social Sciences at SIM University (UniSIM), Singapore's only university for adult learners. Using Delphi Technique, two rounds of surveys were collected from the adult learners (expert learners) in their final year of studies. The researchers have focused on the usefulness of digital and social media as informal learning platforms for the adult learners. The findings will provide useful insights to the researchers' subsequent quantitative research on the adults' informal learning.

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### 1. Introduction

Informal learning is such a prominent feature in the lifelong learning process that educators and education researchers have even considered it a core competency of formal and non-formal learning, and thus indistinguishable by classification from the both (Billett, 2001). An adult survey conducted by Futurelab in 2009 (Hague & Logan, 2009) reports, among other findings, that 94% of participants actively engage in informal learning. In the same report, surveyors found that 79% of participants spend about 8½ hours of leisure time per week learning through technology (via the internet, television, DVDs and videos), mostly at home.

For the purpose of this research, we have taken adult informal learning as learning “in which individual take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (Knowles, 2005, p. 18 ). The aim of this study is to assess whether so-called New Media, which consists of tools such as smart phone applications, social media such as blogs, Facebook and twitter and any other Web 2.0 based internet applications, constitute a platform upon which informal learning occurs.

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Typically, learning outside of formal and non-formal contexts is often neglected despite research by Knowles (2005) and Tough (2002) that suggests 20% of all major learning efforts comprises formal or non-formal with the remaining 80% of learning being informal.

It has been suggested that informal and self-directed learning is often invisible and neglected (Knowles, 2005; Tough, 2002; Livingstone, 2000; Coffield, 1999). Adult informal learning is important for its own sake and for the support it gives to non-formal and formal learning. More than that, it provides people with the means to learn throughout their life.

In a report by FutureLab (2009) “A review of the current landscape of adult informal learning using digital technologies”, it was suggested that given the pervasive technologies available to this generation, the promotion of adult informal learning could help individuals to cope with many changes and challenges facing contemporary society. It was further suggested that adult informal learning could help people find meaning and purpose in periods of unemployment and post employment life; gives people transferable skills to make career changes in middle or later life; and provides a way to share knowledge and experience between generations.

## **2. Research concern**

The focus of this research will be on self-directed learning, which is intentional and planned rather than incidental, and on informal self-directed learning that takes place during leisure time rather than at work. This study will not focus on on-the-job learning in the workplace but instead learning that takes place in people's leisure time outside both work and adult education provision. Given the pervasiveness of the available technology and the tools that are commonly accessible, this research examines how adult learners make use of the social media (e.g. Twitter, FaceBook) in this informal learning process.

The key research concern for this paper is the relation between the use of social media and the effectiveness of learning, which is further operationalized by using the six levels of Bloom taxonomy's learning outcomes.

## **3. Data collection method**

The Delphi method is a panel survey which includes at least two rounds of survey, where the results of the previous round are given as feedback before the group answers the same set of survey for the following round. In other words, the participants answer from the second round under the influence of other participants' opinions. The facilitator can control the interactions among the participants by prompting the relevant information throughout the course.

For this case study, two rounds of survey were collected from the adult learners taking the module Public Relations in week 1 and week 6. These adult learners are in their final year of studies and have taken both e-courses and typical seminar courses. They are considered expert learners. Delphi technique is suitable for purpose of this study as it is a method to gather information from “respondents within their domain of expertise.” (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). The two instructors have discussed intensively with the group on the digital and social media for informal learning throughout the term.

From the two surveys conducted, only 34 complete sets were tallied from 25 female respondents and 9 male respondents. The questionnaire was completed in week 1 (Delphi A or DA) of the course and again in week 6 (Delphi B or DB). Respondents who completed the survey in week 1 but were not present in week 6 to complete the second questionnaire were not included in the final tally. Such incomplete sets were discarded.

#### 4. Selected research findings

##### 4.1. Digital and social media behaviour

Results in DA and DB showed a high consistency of all respondents using the Internet for email and personal communication, for searching information and for social networking. Slightly more than half of the respondents used the Internet for gaming purposes

Time spent on the Internet for leisure ranked high in both DA and DB at 2 hours per day, for work at 2.5 hours per day and for study at 2 hours per day.

The numbers of respondents using Facebook stayed constant at 31 and 8 for Chat/Messenger Service.

In DA, 27 used social media to engage in learning activities while this number fell to 21 in DB, with 3 non respondents.

##### 4.2. Learning outcomes achieved through social media

On a scale of 0 to 10, respondents were asked to rank the various attributes of learning outcomes they have achieved in using social media as an informal learning tool for their course subject matter. The following are results taken from a scale of 7 and above.

For knowledge (such as recall, listing of information, record, define, name and cite), 41% considered they have achieved this in DA and 44% in DB.

For Comprehension (such as describe, explain and comment), 41% considered they have achieved this in DA and 32% in DB.

For Application (such as demonstrate, illustrate, interpret, and re-arrange), 38% considered they have achieved this in DA and 44% in DB.

For Analysis (such as compare and contrast, discuss and solve), 41% considered they have achieved this in DA and 47% in DB.

For Synthesis (such as create, design, plan, propose and recommend), 53% considered they have achieved this in DA and 32% in DB.

For Evaluation (such as conclude, critique, evaluate and assess), 41% considered they have achieved this in DA and 38% in DB.

#### 5. Implications and conclusion

Using Delphi Technique, this study reveals a very interesting situation among the expert learners for this course. Throughout the semester, the two instructors have been proactively discussing and championing the use of social media for informal learning purpose. However, the perceived learning outcomes among learners are not achieved at an equal level. To be specific, respondents felt they have achieved an increase in learning outcomes in areas of Knowledge, Application and Analysis; while a decrease in areas of Comprehension, Synthesis and Evaluation, when it comes to using Social Media as informal learning tools for this course subject matter.

It seems that the more the respondents use the social media for informal learning purpose, it will be less likely for them to perceive that social media would help them achieve the higher level learning outcomes – Synthesis and Evaluation. The researchers believe that the key reason lies in the respondents' perception on social media. Most still believe that it is "informal," hence it is not a platform for more serious learning purpose, such as synthesis and evaluation.

On the other hand, there is an increase for most areas of lower-ordered Learning Outcomes -Knowledge and Application. The researchers believe that this is due to the fact that the social media has effectively provided the respondents with lots of relevant information. This helped increase their knowledge in the subject matter. However,

too much information on the social media has also affected negatively some users' ability to comprehend the content. This explains why there is a drop in the area of Comprehension.

The discussion on social media has also helped the respondents apply what they have learnt effectively using the same platform. Due to the interaction among the social media, the respondents have reported an improvement in their application and analytical skills, after six weeks of intentional use of social media for informal learning purpose.

The researchers believe that the learners' perception has in fact played a very important role in achieving the learning outcomes by using social media. Most still do not perceive social media to be a serious learning platform.

The researchers are collecting data on the respondents' results in assignments and examination. This will provide insight on the actual effectiveness of learning, under the influence of social media as informal learning.

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